



# Umbrella Summary

## Assessment Centers

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

### What are assessment centers?

Assessment centers measure knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics by assessing participants' responses to job-related simulations. Assessment centers can be used for hiring, placement, and career and skill development (Gaugler, Rosenthal, Thornton, and Bentson, 1987). Typically, participants complete a combination of in-basket, leaderless group discussion, role play, case analysis, and oral presentation exercises (Hoffman, Kennedy, LoPilato, Monahan, and Lance, 2015). Within each exercise, participants review job-relevant information and complete tasks. For the in-basket, participants are presented with documents (e.g., emails, memos, reports, requests—things that might be in an inbox) to which they provide responses and about which they make decisions and take action. With leaderless group discussions, participants work with others to come to a consensus about a particular topic, issue, or problem. In role plays, a member of the assessment center team plays the role of an important stakeholder (e.g., subordinate, client, school official, law enforcement) and the participants work with that stakeholder to address a specific scenario. For case analyses and oral presentations, participants review information about an organizational problem and recommend solutions in written and oral form, respectively.

Overall, assessment centers include several exercises with multiple assessors rating participants' performance. As with child welfare work, completing an assessment center requires participants to deal with complex situations, make timely decisions on the basis of limited information, and work effectively with others (Hoffman et al., 2015).

### What do assessment centers measure?

Although assessment centers can be time consuming and expensive, they help organizations assess difficult-to-measure constructs (Thornton and Rupp, 2006). Specifically, assessment centers often target leadership and interpersonal skills and are especially useful for measuring communication, influencing others, problem solving, and organizing and planning (Bowler and Woehr, 2006).

Assessment centers are not typically designed for the purpose of measuring cognitive ability; yet research shows that they are strongly correlated with cognitive ability scores (Collins, Schmidt, Sanchez-Ku, Thomas, McDaniel, and Le, 2003). Thus, independent of what assessment centers may be intended to measure, they are associated with cognitive ability.

## Why are assessment centers valuable?

As hiring tools, assessment centers are valuable because they are moderately associated with candidates' subsequent job performance and performance in training (Schmidt, Oh, and Shaffer, 2016). Assessment centers can be even more powerful predictors of performance when they include multiple exercises and psychologists as assessors (Gaugler et al., 1987).

## QIC-WD Takeaways

- ▶ Assessment centers can be useful hiring tools that lead to higher training and job performance among new hires.
- ▶ Assessment centers are not intended to improve turnover, and there are no meta-analyses assessing that connection. Because they lead to better performance, it is possible that assessment centers may reduce involuntary turnover caused by poor performance, but research is needed to test that question.
- ▶ Assessment centers should be developed on the basis of a job analysis and, when used as hiring assessments, should not target knowledge, skills, or situations that will be covered in training or learned on the job.
- ▶ When used to make hiring decisions, assessment centers are particularly appropriate for jobs that do not involve extensive training or have high minimum requirements. In child welfare, this may mean jobs like supervisors or managers or minimum requirements like a master's degree or many years of previous experience.
- ▶ When used to make hiring decisions, assessment centers are considered tests and are therefore subject to certain professional and legal guidelines. Due to the technical requirements involved in developing and validating an assessment center, it is recommended that agencies consult with an expert for assistance.

## References

- Bowler, M. C., & Woehr, D. J. (2006). A meta-analytic evaluation of the impact of dimension and exercise factors on assessment center ratings. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 91*, 1114–1124.
- Collins, J. M., Schmidt, F. L., Sanchez-Ku, M., Thomas, L., McDaniel, M. A., & Le, H. (2003). Can basic individual differences shed light on the construct meaning of assessment center evaluations? *International Journal of Selection and Assessment, 11*, 17–29.
- Gaugler, B. B., Rosenthal, D. B., Thornton, G. C., III, & Bentson, C. (1987). Meta-analysis of assessment center validity. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 72*, 493–511.
- Hoffman, B. J., Kennedy, C. L., LoPilato, A., C., Monahan, E. L., & Lance, C. E. (2015). A review of the content, criterion-related, and construct-related validity of assessment centers. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 100*, 1143–1168.

Schmidt, F. L., Oh, I-S., & Shaffer, J. A. (2016). The validity and utility of selection methods in personnel psychology: Practical and theoretical implications of 100 years of research findings. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309203898>

Thornton, G. C., III, & Rupp, D. E. (2006). *Assessment centers in human resource management: Strategies for prediction, diagnosis, and development*. Psychological Press: NY.

## Author(s)

Tara Myers, PhD, Independent Consultant

Megan Paul, PhD, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

## Suggested Citation

Myers, T., & Paul, M. (2020, October 28). *Umbrella summary: Assessment centers*. Quality Improvement Center for Workforce Development. <https://www.qic-wd.org/umbrella/assessment-centers>

For general information about Umbrella Summaries, visit <https://www.qic-wd.org/umbrella-summaries-faq>

For more information about the QIC-WD, visit [qic-wd.org](http://qic-wd.org) or contact: Michelle Graef, Project Director, at [mgraef1@unl.edu](mailto:mgraef1@unl.edu).

This Summary was developed with funding from the Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau, Grant #HHS-2016- ACF-ACYF-CT-1178. The content of this publication does not necessarily reflect the view or policies of the funder, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products or organizations imply endorsement by the US Department of Health and Human Services.